

REFLECTIONS OF A MUSLIM LAW STUDENT

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There has been no shortage of interesting people that I have met at law school. Most have been a pleasure to work with. However, there certainly have been some who have elicited a raised eyebrow or two. Recently, I sat in a class where a colleague declared Canada to be a “Judeo-Christian civilization” that is incompatible with “goat-herder cultures.” The comment was made in the context of the constitutional rights of immigrants and cultural accommodation. In particular, he was directing his comments at Muslims.

As a fellow law student and a Muslim, I was stunned. Fortunately, this is a more extreme law school example. Yet, given the current political climate and the abundance of negative media coverage, misconceptions about Muslims and Islam are widespread. As law students, we should be aware of the dangers of stereotypes and discrimination. But law students are only human, and prejudice is no stranger to the legal profession.

Given changing demographics, it is highly probable that many of us will have a Muslim client at some point in our careers. Therefore, it is our responsibility as legal professionals to educate ourselves. But even if our knowledge about Islam and Muslims is limited, the simple concept of treating others as you would like

to be treated goes a long way. At a firm event, one lawyer said to me, “so you’re Muslim? Isn’t Islam against democracy?” Imagine walking up to someone wearing a crucifix around their neck and making the same comment. It would be unprofessional and irrelevant. Of course, most Muslims would probably not mind answering genuine questions about their beliefs. The problem arises when negative stereotypes are assumed and guide how an individual is subsequently treated.

Unfortunately, media reports often portray complex social, political, and economic issues as stemming from Islam’s alleged incompatibility with Western values. Islam is a religion. Like most other religions, it preaches moral values like kindness, charity, and peace. Those who use it as a rallying cry for violence form a minority, no different from extremists of other creeds. Throw in decades of colonialism, poverty, war, illiteracy, unemployment, brutal dictatorial regimes, and it’s surprising that things are not in worse shape.

As future lawyers, it is imperative that we actively avoid perpetuating stereotypes. Muslims are not here to establish an Islamic state or threaten the social or political fabric of Canada. Islam is not a religion that condones oppression of women, dictatorships, and violence. For example, while European women were still con-

sidered the property of their husbands, Muslim women owned businesses, inherited money, and bequeathed property. In fact, the Prophet Mohamed’s employer, who would later become his wife, was a wealthy business woman who was married twice before.

Examples like this are often left out of media reports. Instead, mention of the word ‘Islamic’ can prompt disproportionate reactions. The Ontario ‘Shari’a courts’ controversy is one example. A proposal for a community-based family arbitration process was portrayed as Muslims trying to implement Islamic law. In reality, it was an extension of existing processes available to Christian and Jewish communities. Consent of both parties was required, and any resolutions were legally scrutable. However, the resulting uproar sent a clear message to Canadian Muslims: Jews and Christians can resolve their marital disputes, but not Muslims.

It is impossible to recount and deconstruct every stereotype out there in a short Canons article. Instead, my wish is to hopefully raise awareness about the issue and offer an alternative perspective.

